



Mother ode

Hazel Phillips stood up to be counted at open-mic poetry

**I'm not nervous.
I'm. Not. Nervous.**
I'm not nervous not at all.

OK – actually I'm nervous almost to the point of chewing my hands and feet off. But I'd rather eat polystyrene with hair sauce than acknowledge it.

It's Tuesday evening and I'm at The Classic on Auckland's Queen Street – normally a comedy venue.

Tonight, however, it's poetry night... and I'm on a mission to get down with my poetical self.

I've managed to make the classic beginner's mistake: writing 20 of my muses to come along and support me (she have a laugh at my expense).

I've done a few poetry readings in my time, but they've all been among friends and usually in German, which helps to distract from nerves, as you're concentrating so hard on pronouncing the aches and ouches properly. (There's nothing like being a 17-year-old exchange student to get the creative juices flowing.)

I've always longed to be one of those cool, calm people who can stand up in front of a crowd without their hands shaking. Public speaking, debating, stand-up comedy – I admire those who seemingly take it in their stride. Meanwhile, I'm shaking inside and out.

So here I am, up on the stage, lights blinding me like

a possum with a one-way ticket to Harp Land, staring out into the expectant crowd. And it really is a crowd – standing room only. Which I was not expecting... I chide myself for thinking not many people would turn up for a poetry night.

It's a crowd that seems to be split into three. One third is angry emes, wearing black, with lots of creative piercings. Another third is crafty types – actually knitting as they sit there with their glasses of Malbec – wearing second-hand clothes, kind of geeky cool. Oh, and then there's my friends.

And me? I'm in an uber-sensuous black dress to show I take my newfound craft seriously. But I just couldn't resist adding a pink scarf. I don't think the audience are taking me seriously with the scarf. Suddenly I regret it.

Light's shining in the face,

possum scared. But let's rewind a little, shall we?

Creative licence

Four days earlier, I sit down to write a couple of poems. How hard can it be? Iambic pentameter, a little humour, maybe slip in a couple of naughty words.

I call Minam Barr, who organises the weekly poetry readings, for some tips.

"Write poetry as often as you can," she says. "Just sit down and write, and then go through it and pare it down, chop out the bad lines so that the really good lines are the ones that make up the bulk. Chop out the unnecessary stuff so it's more concise."

One technique Minam suggests is to pick a page in a book and use only words on that page to construct a poem. She also advises



me to avoid clichés and overused language, and to find something to say. "Writing an in-depth description of a season isn't going to capture someone's attention," she points out.

Easy for her to say, isn't it? Miriam began writing poetry at the age of eight. Not at 30, like me. Auckland's Poetry Live has been going for 30 years, and Miriam has been running it for the past two. The most important thing, she tells me, is to write about something you know.

Well, there's nothing I know more about than being naked in the shower, all soaped up, only to discover there's a fat, hairy spider in the corner. So I write about that – and my first gem emerges as "That F**king Spider", aka "Naked In The Shower". To give you an idea, the first three verses:

*There I was all soapy
About to wash my hair
I looked up in the corner
And it was too much to bear*

*There lurked a f**king spider
As happy as you please
His very bathroom presence
Made me quiver at the knees*

*He really was a big one
All furry, fat and plump
Every time that f**ker moved
He made me twitch and jump*

But one poem is not going to cut it. Another subject dear to my heart is boganism – black jeans and Holden utes. So I

they're considering smiling, I just know it. Perhaps they're even wondering, where can I get a pink scarf like that? They stare. I stare back. With difficulty I prevent myself from running, screaming, from the room. I wobble a little and start to daydream with those lights dazzling me... I'm skiing naked in Switzerland... oh no, wait, I'm back.

The show must go on. I launch into my second poem,

With difficulty, I prevent myself from running, screaming, from the room

take some poetic licence with the truth and out comes "My Brother Was A Bogan".

In the spotlight

I get to the end of my first poem, "Spider", and look up. It seems to have gone down awfully well. Even the emcee in the corner are smiling. Well,

and am delighted to find it also goes down well. There's even a chuckle or two from the crowd.

Exiting the stage, I almost fall over (it's the nerves, not the half glass of wine I had beforehand), and drop into my seat. Sweat is pouring off me, and continues to do so for the next half hour.

Later, after I calm down, I realise it wasn't so bad after all. Even though my Mao crashed at the last minute, losing my poems, meaning I had to scribble them down from memory at the last second. Even though I had to face a crowd of expectant people as I asked humiliation and loss of self-respect on an extremely public scale. And even though I have minimal talent for poetry.

And sure, I'd do it again. Maybe not next week or next month, but perhaps next year. Or the year after. Procrastination is a nervous gal's best friend.

I think I've gained something from the experience, but I can't quite put my finger on what it was. Confidence? A bold, brash outlook? A sweaty dress? Hmmmm.

I reckon I'm an artiste in the making. **WZ**

Hazel Phillips, a freelance writer based in Auckland, now also answers to the name "Wordsworth"